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# Plot thickens as gipsy battle looms

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IT HAS come to be known as the Battle of Crays Hill. Standing on Green Belt land and stretching far into the distance, the hundreds of caravans and bungalows that make up Britain's largest and longest-established gipsy and traveller site have long attracted the ire of nearby residents.

For the past eight years councilors have struggled, through the courts, to rid their area of the 1,000 travellers who, without planning permission, have made their home on the fields once known as Dale Farm, on the outskirts of Basildon, Essex.

Now the site's inhabitants are preparing for what many fear could be a violent confrontation with bailiffs and council officials determined to evict them.

It emerged at a court hearing last week that the council may treat evicted travellers as homeless, putting them at the front of the queue for social housing. Yet the travellers insist they want new caravan pitches rather than "bricks and mortar" properties.

Now it can be disclosed that a remarkable intervention by a government agency means they may be offered land only a mile from Crays Hill.

The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) has offered to rehouse the evicted travellers on land it owns. Officials from the agency held a secret meeting with Basildon council in August, at which they put forward land for one or more authorised traveller sites. Details of the meeting were later leaked, leading to fears among residents living close to HCA land that the Crays Hill travellers would soon be relocated near them.

At Crays Hill, families have erected barbed wire fencing and stockpiled planks, rubble and tyres with which to build barricades in the event of any attempt to remove them by force. A banner erected across the gates to the site proclaims: "We won't go".

"They won't be moving us from here without a fight," said Mary Anne McCarthy, one of the site's matriarchs, a 69-year-old Irish-born traveller.

The battle to rid the area of the Crays Hill encampment has been a

tortuous one, exposing the deep-seated tensions between "settled" communities and travelling families who arrive in their midst.

Small numbers of travellers have been living legally at the site since the 1960s, but in recent years a marked increase in numbers – the majority moving in without planning permission – has led to complaints about anti-social behaviour and petty crime.

At every stage the travellers have challenged Basildon council's attempts to remove them, employing batteries of solicitors – largely paid for by Legal Aid.

When the council tried to send in bailiffs, the travellers went to the High Court where they won an eleventh-hour reprieve to stop the eviction. In January last year the Appeal Court reversed that decision and told the council it could go ahead with the removals.

Council officials began to believe the end was in sight, having already run up £1 million in legal bills with estimates that the total cost, including the restoration of Dale Farm to Green Belt condition, will exceed £3.5 million. On top of this, the policing bill for evicting the travellers could reach £10 million if the situation turns violent.

But just weeks before eviction notices were due to be issued, the HCA – a quango that survived this month's government cull – came forward with its rehousing offer. Encouraged by the turn of events, the travellers are preparing to submit planning applications for HCA land across the A127, just over a mile from Dale Farm.

One such plot, at Pound Lane in Basildon, is currently a mixture of open fields and woodland, overlooked by the picturesque village church of St Nicholas and bordered by a row of semi-detached houses and bungalows.

Here, comments from furious residents illustrate the intractability of the problem.

Rob Cresswell, 34, said: "We're all scared they'll just come and take what they want."

Emma Cracknell, 21, a sales assistant, said: "This is a nice street and we don't want it overrun by travellers. We look after our homes here, it's a friendly neighbourhood and we don't want that to change." Another long-standing Pound Lane



The Dale Farm site near Crays Hill, above, and right, the gateway sign 'we won't go'. Left, Dale Farm resident Mary Anne McCarthy

“If it comes to eviction, we'll put up a good fight. We'll put up resistance”



resident, a 69-year-old retired credit controller who has lived in the street for decades, said: "What is the point of moving them from Dale Farm only to create a new problem here? I know everyone has to have somewhere to live, but frankly we don't want travellers here. They'll ruin what are still green fields and bring traffic and noise with them, never mind the social problems."

For their part, the Crays Hill travellers say all they want is somewhere to raise their children away

from the prejudice of "settled" people. They have vowed to defy their imminent eviction – unless they are found an alternative site of an equal size that would allow them to stay together as a single community.

Mrs McCarthy, who has lived on the site since 2002 and shares it with her seven children, 20 grandchildren and four great grandchildren, said: "If it comes to an eviction we'll put up a good fight. We'll put up resistance. The council says there are too many travellers in

Basildon so they want to evict us and make us go away. But they couldn't say and do that about black and Asian people, could they? So why us?"

She added: "Wherever we go people complain before they even get to know us. Our men go out and work. We don't allow our young girls to sleep around or get drunk. But people are immediately prejudiced against us."

The ultimate outcome depends in part on the ruling in an ongoing test case at Southend County Court,

where four Crays Hill travellers, John Sheridan, 33, John and Mary Flynn, 77 and 79, and Barbara O'Brien, are arguing for the right to continue their traditional way of life.

The HCA, formerly the Commission for New Towns, was formed in 2008 to oversee the construction of affordable homes and revive areas with rundown housing. It controls more than £1 billion worth of land and property assets across Britain. Last year it spent £5 billion and it aims to reclaim more than 2,500 acres of brownfield land by next

year. It has defended its decision to offer land to Basildon council, saying it had a responsibility to help local authorities meet the "housing needs and priorities" of people from all sections of the community.

However, the council has since pulled out of talks with the HCA after details of the secret discussions were leaked. Tony Ball, leader of the council, said "the authority would not now provide new land for the Crays Hill travellers unless other districts in Essex were prepared to do the same."